WHEN HANNAH VAR EIGHT YAR OLD

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KATHERINE
PEABODY
GIRLING

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"Se look out across de mountain all mit snow white and mit moonlight cold"

When Hannah Var Eight Yar Old

by

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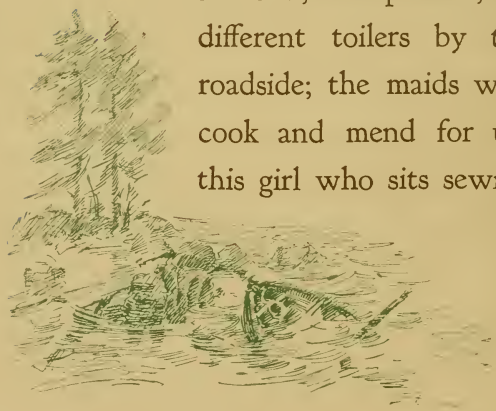
WHEN HANNAH VAR EIGHT YAR OLD

ERE you a little girl, Hannah, when you came to America?" I asked.

"No," she replied, letting her sewing fall in her lap as her grave eyes sought mine slowly, "I var a big girl eight yar old."

"Eight years old? How big you must have been! Can you tell me about it? Why you came?"

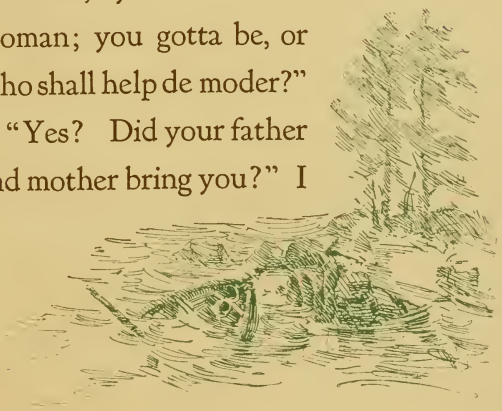
The recent accounts of people driven to America by tragedy, or drawn by a larger hope of finding a life to live in addition to earning a living, had colored my thoughts for days. Have all immigrants—the will-less, leaden people who pass in droves through our railway stations; the patient, indifferent toilers by the roadside; the maids who cook and mend for us; this girl who sits sewing



with me to-day—a memory and a vision? Is each of them in some degree a Mary Antin? So I closed the magazine and asked her.—"A big girl eight yar old," she said.

"Oh, well," Hannah explained, "in Old Country if you are eight yar old and comes younger child'n in familie, you are old woman; you gotta be, or who shall help de moder?"

"Yes? Did your father and mother bring you?" I



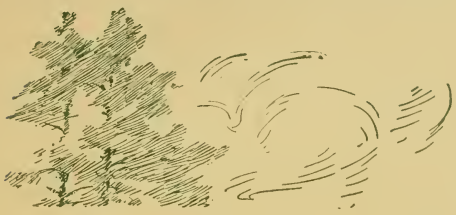
continued, probing for the story.

"No,—fader and moder var daid. My h'aunt, my fader's broder's wife, se came for us. It cost her twenty-eight dollar, but se do it."

"But surely you can't go to Sweden and return for twenty-eight dollars!"

"Seventeen yar ago, yes, but of course you must to take your own providings. It don't require much." Hannah's shoulders drew together expressively. "Madam knows she is apt to miss her appetite at sea!"

"But too well." I shrugged



sympathetically. Then we both laughed.

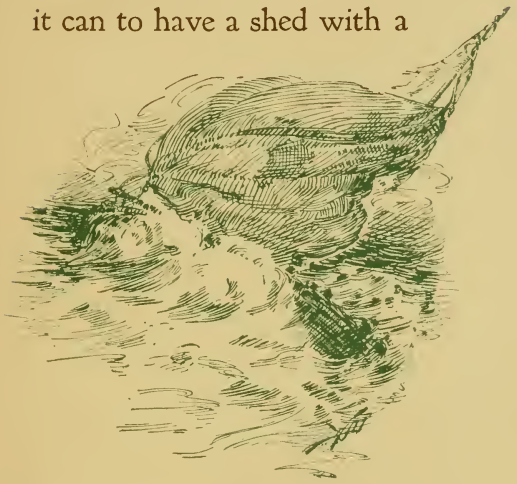
"I can to tell you how it is I came on Ahmericah, but"—Hannah waited for words to express

her warning—"it will make you a sharp sadness."

"Please."

"I don't know if I can tell it to you good, but I tell it so good as I can. My fader he var Swedish fisherman vat h'own his boat and go away by weeks and weeks, and sometimes comes strong wedder and he can't make it to get home quick. My moder se var German." Hannah hesitated, and then in lowered tones of soft apology added, "Se var a ver' pretty woman. Var three child'n more as me—Olga var five yar old, and Hilda three and Jens—well, Jens var just

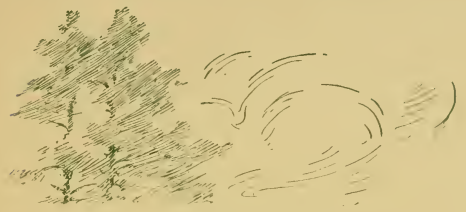
a baby, suppose yar and half. We live in a little house close on by de sea. It is yust a little house, but it can to have a shed with a



floor of stone. The door of de shed is broken so it is like a window mitout glass.

"The house is close on by a big

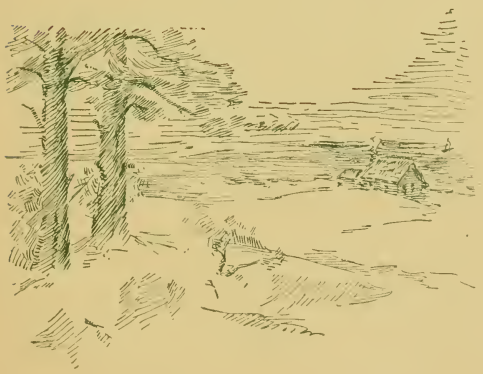
dock where in somer-time comes big excursion-steamer mit—suppose hundert tourist people who climb on de mountain up de road. My moder se sell dem hot coffee, also bread and cheese, but dat is not de reason why we live in de little so lonesome house. It is de big dock is de reason. My fader he can to come home from late fishings mitout needing dat he sall walk on de roads. In Sweden in winter de roads swallow snow till it makes dangersome to you to walk because hides holes to step in. We live dare all somer, but in late autumn my fader



he say, 'What about de winter?'

"My moder se say, 'I don't know, but anyway ve try it vonce.'

"Den my fader he go avay in



his boad and my moder se get bad cold and comes sickness on her, and ven se couldn't to keep care on us by reason se is too weak, se lay on de cot in de kitchen-room and vatch on me dat I sall learn to keep care on de child'n."

"But what did you live on? How did you keep warm?"

"Oh,—is plenty fuel, and ve make hot stew of dried meat mit rice and raisins.

"One day my moder se say me, 'Hannah,' se say, 'you bain a big girl, I must to tell you sometings. You fader is very late, it seems, and winter comes now. I cannot

to wait much more. It is soon I got to go. You must n't take a fear of me if I come all white like

de snow and don't talk mit you any more. De little child'n dey will take a fear and cry. I cannot

to bring a fear on my little child'n.'

"So se tell me what I sall do —I sall close bot' her eyes up and tie her hands togeder and lock de shed door."

"The shed door!"

"Ya."

Hannah had resumed her sewing. Her thread fairly snapped as stitch fell by even stitch with monotonous rhythm. In quiet, uneventful tone she continued,—

"So one night pretty soon se make dat I sall bring her best nightgown and help her mit to put it on. Den se kiss de little

child'n in dair sleepings and se sit on a stool by de fire and say I sall put Jens in her arms. Se try to rock back and fort' and se sing on him a little hymn. But se is too weak, and I must to take him. Den se put on me a shawl and tie it behind under my arms, and se lean heavy on me, and we go out into de shed. My moder se do her bare feet on de stone floor. Se have yust but her nightgown on, but it is her best one with crocheted lace at de neck and wrists. Se tell me I sall put de ironing-board across two chair-

seats, but it is too heavy and se sall try to help me, but comes coughing on her and se must to hold on by de shed door. Se look out across de road and de mountain all mit snow white and mit moonlight cold. And blood is on her lips but se wipe it away mit a snow bunch. Well, anyway, we do de ironing-board across de chair-seats and I spread a white sheet and put a head-cushion and my moder lie down and I cover her mit a more other sheet over.

"'Oh, moder,' I say, 'let me make some warm coverings on you.'

"'No,' se say, so soft dat I listen mit my ear, 'I must to come here while I yet have de stren'th, but I want to go quick away, and in de cold I go more quick. Oh, Hannah!' se say, 'my big daughter! You are so comfortable to me!'

"So I hold my moder's hand. Pretty soon it comes cold. I klapp it mit mine, but it comes more cold. I crumple it up and breathe my hot breath in it, but it comes not warm any more. So mit

my fader's Sunday handkerchief I bind her eyes like if you play Blindman mit de child'n, and mit an apron-string I tie her hands together. Den I go back and make my hands warm in de kitchen-room and I take de comb down off de string, and I go back to my moder and make her hair in two braids like as I did all when se was sick. My moder se haf very strong hair; it is down by her knees on and so yellow,—so yellow as a copper tea-kettle! It could to haf been red but it yust are not. Den I lock de shed door and crawl in bed mit de child'n to make me warm.

"Next day I tell de child'n dat moder is gone away. Dey cry some, but pretty soon dey shut up. Anyway, it is so long se haf lain on de cot in de kitchen-room dat dey don't haf to miss her.

"So I keep care on de child'n and play wid dem, and some days go by. Comes stronger wedder mit storms of sleet and snow, and de wind sob and cry.

"Comes nobody on. At night when de child'n are sleeping I unlock de shed door and go to see if it makes all right mit my moder. Sometimes it is by de moonlight I see on her, but

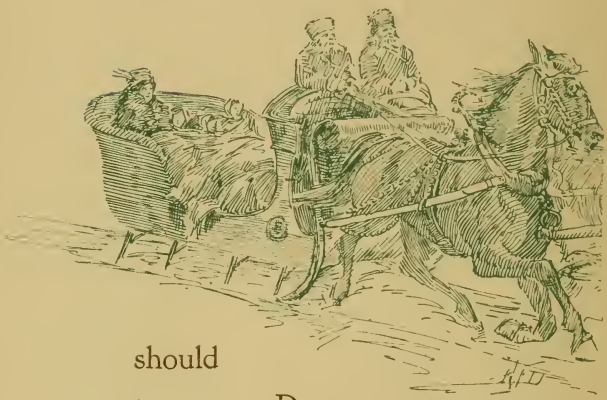
more often it is by a candle-glimmer."

Hannah broke the subdued tone of her narrative to add in a lower, more confiding note, "It is mit me now dat when I see a candle on light I haf a sharp sadness.

"Pretty soon de wedder is more better, and comes a man trompling troo de snow to tell my moder dat her husband can't come home yust yet—he is drowned in de sea. When he see how it is mit

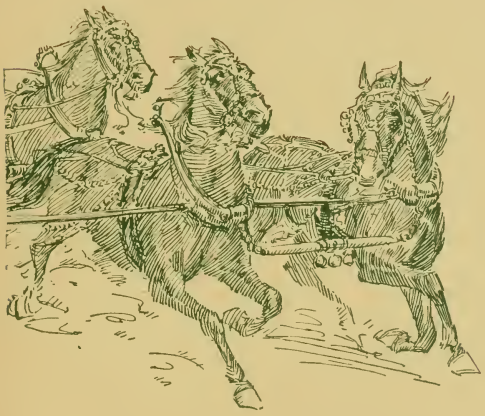
my moder and mit me and de little child'n, de water stands in his eyes —ya. And he go on, troo de snow, tree, four mile nearer on de city to de big castle where live de lady wat h'own all de land and se come in sleigh mit four horsen and big robes of fur and yingling bells. Se see on my moder and se go quick away, but so soon as it can, se come again and se do on my moder a white robe, heavy mit lace, most beautiful! and white stockings of silk and white slippers broidered mit pearlen. Se leaf my moder's hair, as I fixed it, in two braids, but se put a wreath of flowers,

white and green, yust like de real ones. Is few real flowers in Sweden in winter. Anyway, dese var like de flowers a girl vat gets married



should to wear. Den my lady se send her sleigh dat all de people should come and see on de so brave woman vat could n't to bring a fear on her little child'n.

And de people dey make admiration on my moder. Dey say it is de prettiest dey ever see it, and dey make pity dat se could n't to



see it herself." She paused and breathed deeply. "I wish se could have to seen dose slippers!"

"And did no one tell you that

you were a wonderful little girl?"

"Oh, vell—I var eight yar old."

"But what became of you all?"

"My lady took us home in her sleigh mit—I want to stay mit my moder, but se say I sall come to keep care on de child'n dat dey don't cry. And dey don't cry—dey laugh mit de yingling bells. De need was on me strong, but I don't cry before my lady. Se var great dame vat go in de court mit de queen. Se sent men and dey do my moder in a coffin and carry her to a little chapel house in cemetaire and in de spring ven de snow is gone dey bury her. My lady se put

a white stone mit my moder's name and some poetry—I can't to say it good in English, but it says, 'The stren'th in the heart of her poor is the hope of Sweden.'"

"And then did your aunt come?"

"Ya; my lady se wrote on my fader's broder vat var in Ahmericah. Se say we can to stay mit her, but my onkle he send his wife, and we come back mit her on Ahmericah, und dat is all how I came to be here."

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